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Unmasking Lucien Greaves, Leader of the Satanic Temple

Lucien Greaves of the Satanic Temple first showed up at my door over a decade ago. He wanted a copy of a book I had republished called Might Is Right. It was a 100-year-old tome, long forgotten by most, with the exception of Anton LaVey, who'd...

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Jul 30 2013, 1:07pm

Doug Mesner. Photo by Shane Bugbee.

I have sought to promote alternative thought for more than 25 years as a publisher, promoter, gallery owner, and, as my mother-in-law once said, "a flim-flam man." During this time, I have opened the door to free thinkers and pure crazies alike. Sometimes they are welcome guests; other times, not so much.

Lucien Greaves of the Satanic Temple, who first showed up at my door over a decade ago, would fall into the former category. He was a young man, too smart for his own good. He wanted a copy of a book I had republished called *Might Is Right.* It was a 100-year-old tome, long forgotten by most, with the exception of Anton LaVey, who'd found it in a bookstore as a young man and used it as the basis for *The Satanic Bible*. I asked Anton to write an introduction, and he jumped at the opportunity to introduce the book to the world again. By way of thanks Anton invited me to his home and made me a high priest in the Church of Satan. He also allowed my wife and I to **conduct the final interview with him** just months before his death in 1996.

The release of this new version of *Might Is Right* became a phenomenon within the underground, and that is what brought the future leader of the Satanic Temple to my door. Only his name wasn't Lucien Greaves at the time, it was Doug Mesner. (This **isn't the first time Doug has been connected with the Temple**, though it is the first time he has publicly admitted his involvement.)

When he first came to my home, Doug brought a stack of his drawings and writings with him. It was amazing stuff, and much to my surprise he left it with me. Not long after our first meeting, and after reviewing his sketchbooks at

length, I reprinted **a limited edition version of *Might Is Right*** and asked Doug to illustrate the chapter headings for it. His work on the book was truly excellent. When I began podcasting in 2002, I invited him to co-host the first-ever live streaming 24 hour broadcast. For 24 hours straight we interviewed guests, philosophized, and argued. It was so great we did another one a year later.

Not long after that Doug was accepted to Harvard University. He used to call me, shocked that his professors were taking him to lunch and inviting him to meet with luminaries like Richard Dawkins. Doug's studies at Harvard focused on neuroscience, and he began delving deeply—and sometimes dangerously, I felt—into the world of false memory related to ritual abuse and alien abduction, even **exposing professional psychologists** as culprits and forcing them to recant, retire, and even run.

Doug Mesner became an active participant in the Satanic Temple to further his work and philosophy, and below is the exclusive interview I recently conducted with him.

The author (left), with Mesner (right). Photo by Amy Bugbee

VICE: Is the Satanic Temple a satanic, or a satirical group?
Doug: That is a common question. I say why can't it be both? We are coming from a solid philosophy that we absolutely believe in and adhere to. This is Satanism, and to us it couldn't be called anything other than Satanism. However, our metaphor of Satan is a literary construct inspired by authors such as Anatole France and Milton—a rebel angel defiant of autocratic structure and concerned with the material world. Satanism as a rejection of superstitious supernaturalism. This Satan, of course, bears no resemblance to the embodiment of all cruelty, suffering, and negativity believed in by some apocalyptic segments of Judeo-

Christian culture. The word *Satan* has no inherent value. If one acts with compassion in the name of Satan, one has still acted with compassion. Our very presence as civic-minded socially responsible Satanists serves to satirize the ludicrous superstitious fears that the word *Satan* tends to evoke.

Reminds me of a darker version of the Yes Men.
Yes. Just as the Yes Men use very catching theatrical ploys to draw attention to a progressive agenda, we play upon people's irrational fears in a way that hopefully causes them to reevaluate what they think they know, redefine arbitrary labels, and judge people for their concrete actions. I believe that where reason fails to persuade, satire and mockery prevail. Whereas many religious groups seem to eschew humor, we embrace it.

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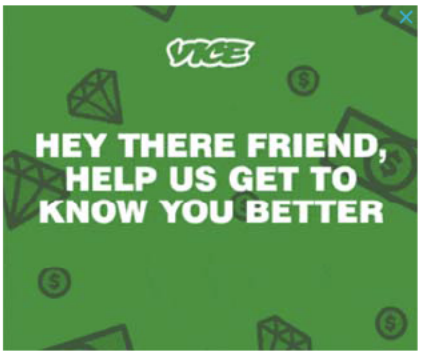

Can you give me a bit of background information on the temple? Do you consider yourselves activists?
The Satanic Temple was actually conceived of independent from me by a friend and one of his colleagues. They envisioned it more as a "poison pill" in the Church/State debate. The idea was that Satanists, asserting their rights and privileges where religious agendas have been successful in imposing themselves upon public affairs, could serve as a poignant reminder that such privileges are for everybody, and can be used to serve an agenda beyond the current narrow understanding of what "the" religious agenda is. So at the inception, the political message was primary, though it was understood that there are, in fact, self-identified Satanists who live productive lives within the boundaries of the law, and that they do deserve just as much consideration as any other religious group. I was brought in originally as a consultant due to my expertise in the history of witch hunts and my understanding regarding conceptions of Satanism. While the original thinking was that the Satanic Temple needed to hold to some belief in a supernatural entity known as "Satan," none of us truly believed that. I helped develop us into something we all do truly believe in and wholeheartedly embrace: an atheistic philosophical framework that views "Satan" as a metaphorical construct by which we contextualize our works. We've moved well beyond being a simple political ploy and into being a very sincere movement that seeks to separate religion from superstition and to contribute positively to our cultural dialogue. To this end, I am very much an activist.

The author, strangling Doug. Photo by Amy Bugbee.

I've known you for a long time, and the Satanic Temple seems like an extension of your life's work and studies. What exactly are you fighting, trying to change, or needing to prove—what's the end game here, Doug?

I grew up in the shadow of what is now known to sociologists as "the Satanic Panic"—an embarrassing episode of witch-hunting in the modern era. I was horrified by daytime talk show fables of homicidal Satanic cult hordes. I became very curious, later on, regarding the question of the truth of the conspiracy claims, and I began pursuing this as an active study. Was there any truth to the idea of murderous Satanic cults? In fact, there is no unbroken tradition of Satanism, no canonized Satanic doctrine that extends back for centuries into biblical times. Nor is there one uniform concept of Satan. Anton LaVey's *The Satanic Bible* was released in 1969, and contained no indication of the antihuman doctrine alleged by hysterical anti-Satanists. Sometimes, however, anti-Satanist conspiracy theorists would point to particular groups of alleged "Satanists" as evidence of their claims. I went looking for these alleged Satanic cults and found no substance to the claims against them. I met you, Shane, and you were a priest in the Church of Satan who was conferred with that title by Anton LaVey himself. You and I found and **interviewed inner-circle members of the notorious Process Church of the Final Judgment**, which was said by some to be the world's most dangerous "Satanic" cult. Through you, I met a variety of self-proclaimed Satanists of the LaVeyan school and others, finding them to be a demographic no more burdened by psychopathy than any other (and, in fact, full of some very thoughtful, intelligent people). I illustrated an edition of *Might Is Right*, the text of which LaVey had built *The Satanic Bible* from, and which you published—along with a forward by LaVey—when you were running Michael Hunt Publishing. In all that time, I never encountered credible evidence of a criminal Satanic network.

In 2009, I went to a "Ritual Abuse/Mind-Control" conference in Connecticut where I listened to "experts" elaborate upon their beliefs in Satanic Ritual crimes. I thought they would be a fringe grouping of delusional people holding firmly to incredible beliefs, hurting nobody but themselves. What I found instead was a twisted subculture of licensed therapists, and their clients, who subscribe to a pseudoscientific belief in "dissociative amnesia": The theory that some events—particularly sexual abuse—can be so uniquely traumatic that the conscious mind cannot comprehend it, and thus those memories are "repressed." This school of "therapy" breeds conspiracy theory and literally indoctrinates clients into false beliefs in a Satanic threat. Clients are encouraged to "remember" episodes of abuse that are presumed to have been concealed from their conscious minds, and when the evidence doesn't match their confabulatory false memories, they explain it away as evidence of a much larger conspiracy—a Satanic conspiracy. With the false veneer of science, these "experts" in dissociation have kept a witch-hunt alive. Innocent people have been convicted and imprisoned on the "evidence" of recovered memory testimony, even though this is the exact same "evidence" we have for alien abduction, and is the same "therapeutic" process by which people practice "past life regression." I have a long and complex body of writing, much of which can be read at **www.process.org**, where I detail in a number of articles how this cult-like therapy subculture continues to ruin the lives of innocent people. So one of my own goals is to destroy this harmful pseudoscientific practice, and dispel the myth of an international Satanic conspiracy. The broader goal of the Satanic Temple in general is to advocate for all of those who are unjustly maligned, demonized, or marginalized—victimized by conspiracy theorists and dogmatic supernaturalists. We seek to assert the rights of religious non-believers and skeptics. We also hope to provide the philosophical framework by which our membership may hone their cognitive tools and never fall victim to those forces.

And what the hell is a religious nonbeliever?

It is our goal to separate religion from superstition. Religion can and should be a metaphorical narrative construct by which we give meaning and direction to our lives and works. Our religions should not require of us that we submit ourselves to unreason and untenable supernatural beliefs based on literal interpretations of fanciful tales. Non-believers have just as much right to religion—and any exemptions and privileges being part of a religion brings—as anybody else.

Some might think, based on your study of the mind and the Satanic Temple's actions, that your real agenda is to become a cult leader. Is that the organization's true goal?

I studied, and continue to study, cognitive science. I also have a good deal of background studying cults and coercion. My focus, however, is in teaching people to recognize cultic influence, and help them learn ways in which they can resist coercive influences. We want to provide our membership with the philosophical framework and cognitive tools to exercise their critical thinking skills in such a way that will help immunize them from the various mystical charlatans who seek to convert them into credulous followers. We do not want

followers. We seek to build and offer support to leaders. We do not seek to build a rigid authoritarian structure—such would be the very antithesis of Satanism. Far from being a cult, the Satanic Temple could even be described as the anticult.

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What's the difference between the Satanic Temple and the Church of Satan?
The Church of Satan was active, it seems, during Anton LaVey's own lifetime, but appears to be almost entirely defunct now. It's currently reduced to a website from which one may buy a membership card, but I'm not aware of any actual activities that they've been involved in during the past couple of decades. The Church of Satan may believe that it provides a service simply by being a rallying point for "like-minded individuals," but the value of that has been greatly diminished since the internet era, now that obscure niche groups are always within reach of our social networks—nor do they require a $200 entry fee [the cost of a Church of Satan membership card]. I believe that organizations should be measured for their effect in the real world, and should work to advance the general goals of their membership. We must constantly work to prove ourselves to our membership, not the other way around.

The author and Doug at a book signing for Might Is Right*, 2004. Photo by Amy Bugbee.*

You once mentioned to me that you thought the Church of Satan should have lobbyists on the ground in Washington, DC. Is that a goal for the Satanic Temple?
Yes, it is. By the time the New Atheism movement took hold, Satanism appeared to be a silly little throwback to the 1960s—absolutely no political influence, no known agenda, no advocacy whatsoever. Even in the high-profile West Memphis Three case, there was no discernable noise from an established Satanic organization expressing outrage over the fact that the idea of Satanism, in and of itself, was used as an accusation to convict innocent kids of murder. This kind of inaction is worse than worthless—it's counter-productive. There is no point in running an organization unless you are going to organize. There is no point in

being a part of an organization if that organization is not going to work to address the concerns and advance the goals of its membership. We are in the process of setting up a legal fund, we are strategizing a number of future campaigns, and we are aggressively going to pursue the agendas we put forward.

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The Church of Satan has recently posted about the Satanic Temple, without directly mentioning it. They seem to be trying to separate themselves from the Satanic Temple because of its references to the afterlife in its ritual? Are you a spiritual Satanist, a theistic Satanist, or is the Satanic Temple adding to LaVey's philosophy, much like LaVey added to Ragnar Redbeard's *Might Is Right*?

They misinterpreted what we were doing, but that's not entirely their fault. Something that I explained in a number of interviews with media—but that failed to show up in the majority of them—is the fact that I do not believe in the supernatural. Instead, when we performed our **Pink Mass at the grave of the mother of the Westboro Baptist Church's founder**, Fred Phelps, we were playing upon his own ludicrous superstitious fears. Ironically, the Church of Satan has never fully renounced supernaturalism, as we have.

And, yes, we are adding to LaVey. LaVey is an excellent jumping-off point, but his work was a product of its time, and it's appropriate to recontexualize it to today's reality. LaVey was active during a time in which, for decades, the United States was on a dysfunctional spiral of increasing violence. As a result, LaVey's rhetoric tended toward Social Darwinistic Police State politics. Since 1995, violence in the United States—and, in fact, the world over—has been in decline, and we're now in a position to evaluate what's working for us, and where we went wrong previously. Certainly, a strong and effective police presence is a contributing factor, but we also find that autocratic governments breed social violence. We also find that Social Darwinism, interpreted in brutal, strictly self-interested terms, is counter-productive, and based on a simplistic misinterpretation of evolutionary theory. We do better when we work in groups, where altruism and compassion are rewarded. We are social animals. That said, however, I believe in a system that runs meritocratically. Also, revenge is a natural impulse, without which justice would never be served. We should do our best to mitigate the pain of those who are suffering, whoever they are—but also be diligent to punish the misdeeds of those who behave unjustly to those around them.

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What can you tell me about the documentary you're filming? This is the project that launched the Satanic Temple, correct?

When the Satanic Temple was conceived, the idea was that a documentary would be assembled from the various actions we would perform to put a new spin on the entire Church/State debate. To that end, we staged a **rally in support of Florida Governor Rick Scott's passage of Senate Bill 98**, a bill that essentially allowed for prayer in school. While many groups were upset and offended that Scott was advancing a conservative Christian agenda, we staged a Satanic rally

thanking Rick Scott for endorsing a bill that allowed Satanism in schools, ensuring that children who might otherwise never learn of the Satanic creed could be exposed to it in the classroom. This was a harsh reminder that religious freedom applies to all, and the United States is a nation based upon religious pluralism. During that time, we generated a lot of genuine interest from people looking to embrace a politically active, relevant Satanism. More and more we developed into a full-blown organization with a very profound mission. Now—although we have still been filming everything—we have no clearly defined film project regarding the Satanic Temple in the works to speak of. The idea of a film has become secondary, at best.

Most Satanists struggle with the ego issue... What happens if you fail to raise the funds needed for your adopt-a-highway project?
Then we move onto the next thing, or we make up the slack on the highway fund through another venue. It may sound platitudinous, but there is no shame in not reaching the goal, only in not trying at all. We haven't, and won't, gamble our entire organization on any one project. There are some things we'll do that won't work out as planned, and others that will surely hit the mark. We'll keep working either way.

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